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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 006615

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [IZ](#) [KPAO](#) [MOPS](#) [PREL](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: DISTORTED TURKISH REACTION TO FALLUJAH OPERATION
CREATES POISONOUS ANTI-U.S. ATMOSPHERE

Classified by Ambassador Eric Edelman, E.O. 12958, reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

[11.](#) (C) Summary: Over the past two weeks, Turkish media portrayal of the al-Fajr operation in Fallujah has been unabashedly biased, vehemently anti-U.S. and often flat-out wrong. The MFA did not react to the most outrageous misstatements until November 26; the military has been publicly silent. Some Turkish officials, including the PM and FM, have even added fuel to the fire. The Ambassador has privately and publicly worked to correct the record, but the Turkish public, and leading officials, seem ready to accept the most incredible allegations about the facts in Fallujah, and there is a poisonous anti-U.S. atmosphere on Iraq in Turkey today. We cannot stress enough the importance of having reliable, timely information and images for our efforts to counter the prevailing trend. We also need a consistent message from Washington to visiting Turkish officials that anti-American statements by the PM, FM and others will reverberate negatively in the U.S. and damage the relationship. End Summary.

Biased Media

[12.](#) (U) Most Turks get their information from television, where coverage of Fallujah operations even by "responsible" stations has been one-sided and accompanied by slanted commentary. Stations have repeatedly shown footage of a U.S. soldier shooting a wounded prisoner and of U.S. troops entering mosques. Even state-owned TRT television broadcast a claim that the U.S. used chemical weapons in Fallujah, comparing it to photos of Saddam's 1988 chemical weapons attack on Halabja.

[13.](#) (U) There has been almost no mention in electronic or print media of weapons caches found in Fallujah, or mosques used as fighting positions and weapons depots, or evidence of torture and killings by terrorists in Fallujah. Reports of beheadings and kidnappings -- the Margaret Hassan killing, for example -- are reported as if they were isolated events caused by "atmosphere" created by the U.S.-led occupation. Strikingly, Turkish media have drawn practically no connections between Fallujah terrorists and killings of Turkish truck drivers and contractors.

[14.](#) (U) We have seen no media accounts from Turkish reporters on the scene. Some accounts have been based on telephone interviews with civilians, with no mention of how the person came by the information they are relating. Many others are unsourced. The TRT report insidiously implied that the chemical weapons claim was based on Agence France Presse sources, when it actually originated on Islamist websites and Islamist-oriented Turkish dailies.

[15.](#) (U) Much media coverage has been flat-out wrong. The media has repeatedly claimed U.S. use of chemical weapons and massive civilian casualties. Yeni Safak, an Islamist-oriented daily close to the AK government (and the PM's paper of choice), claimed 1,200 U.S. dead and 5,000 civilian dead in Fallujah operations. One virulently anti-American columnist in Yeni Safak has claimed US forces have used chemical weapons, poison gas, nerve agents, napalm and phosphorous bombs. He also wrote on November 27 that "they" (clearly meaning coalition forces) are raping and then killing women and children and leaving their naked bodies on the streets of Fallujah to be eaten by dogs. He further claimed that the marine shooting the wounded Iraqi in the mosque in Fallujah was "deliberately" broadcast by American authorities "to distract attention from the larger massacres" going on there.

[16.](#) (U) Amid the media tidal wave about Fallujah, distinctions between coverage in the Islamist and mainstream press have disappeared. The November 22 front page of left-leaning nationalist Cumhuriyet declared that U.S. soldiers employed a shoot-to-kill policy for all military-age males in Fallujah; Cumhuriyet's November 29 edition carried supposed eyewitness accounts of U.S. use of illegal and non-conventional weapons and U.S. soldiers shooting women carrying white flags.

[17.](#) (U) Anti-U.S. demonstrations have become more frequent, recently occurring almost daily at the Embassy. A November 28 anti-U.S. rally in Istanbul protesting Fallujah operations

drew 20,000 people, according to media figures. In an address to the rally, former Islamist Refah Party PM Erbakan repeated genocide allegations. The rally was front-page news in the November 29 editions of both Islamist Yeni Safak and left-leaning Cumhuriyet.

Some Officials Fuel the Fire

18. (U) Some Turkish officials have added fuel to the fire:

-- In comments at Marmaris University on November 14, PM Erdogan referred to those killed by coalition forces in Fallujah as "martyrs."

-- According to press reports, on November 22, FM Gul said that the U.S. is in danger of "losing the Turkish public" because of inaction against the PKK in Iraq; the MFA spokesman later called us to walk back Gul's statement.

-- On November 25, Parliament's Human Rights Committee President called U.S. operations in Iraq "genocide," unprecedented even by Hitler, and claimed the U.S. was using illegal weapons, possibly including atomic weapons.

-- In his November 25 remarks to the Human Rights Committee, Deputy PM Sahin called the operations "a massacre."

-- Opposition leaders have also spread the distorted view, claiming that the "pro-U.S. government" is failing to express criticism.

Turkish MFA and Military Reaction

19. (C) We have been passing information on Fallujah operations to the MFA, which remained silent until after the Ambassador raised Elkatmis' and other statements with FM Gul on November 26. The MFA issued a November 26 statement about Fallujah noting that "the criticisms...that are called for have been made" and "exaggerated descriptions and characterizations, such as referring to genocide or the use of atomic weapons, cast a shadow over the credibility and fairness of the criticisms..."

110. (C) We have also been passing updated information about Fallujah to the Turkish General Staff. (Although Turkish LNOs in Baghdad and Tampa have access to the same information, their reports flow slowly through channels without wide distribution.) We believe this information prevented the Turkish military leadership from making rash and ill-informed statements as they did in the early days of the September operation in Tal Afar.

111. (C) However, the Turkish media bias on Iraq and Fallujah may be effecting more junior officer levels which do not have access to accurate information. A November 18 incident at Incirlik Air Base in which a Turk (probably a young airman) said over a shared radio net "we hate Americans...(garble)...die" illustrates that a virulent anti-American feeling is developing at lower ranks in the Turkish military.

Ambassador Strikes Back

112. (C) In an effort to stem the anti-American tide, the Ambassador privately raised his concerns about Erdogan's statements and the egregious leaking of the Erdogan-Cheney phone call with both MFA U/S Ali Tuygan and the PM's National Security Advisor, Egemen Bagis, on November 19 and 22, respectively. These conversations, as well as the Embassy reaction Elkatmis' comments (para 8 above), were also the subject of a meeting between the Ambassador and Tuygan on November 26. At the conclusion of the meeting, Tuygan ushered the Ambassador in for a private meeting with FM Gul, who had just returned from the Netherlands. Gul was by turns aggressive and apologetic. He professed to be "unhappy" with the state of U.S.-Turkish relations. He complained about the Ambassador hosting the Archons of the Orthodox Church of North America "under the patronage of the Ecumenical Patriarch." He said Turkey needed "more cooperation" with the U.S. at this "crucial time" before December 17. "I am not comfortable with the situation at present, to be honest," he said. After protesting that he was doing his best to cooperate with the U.S. on Iraq, notably at the meeting in Sharm al-Shaikh, he admitted that there was a public opinion problem in Turkey. He disowned Elkatmis' statement on genocide and said he would make a statement to that effect publicly. (Begin FYI: At the airport, Gul had refused to distance himself from Elkatmis. After the meeting with Ambassador Edelman, he issued the weak statement in paragraph 9, denouncing "exaggerated claims" which undercut the credibility of the legitimate criticisms of U.S. policy. For his part, Parliament Speaker Arinc has said he "respects" Elkatmis's statement. End FYI.)

113. (C) The Ambassador noted that the U.S. continued to support Turkey and was weighing in with European capitals to keep extraneous Cyprus and Aegean-related issues out of the decision on beginning of accession talks. That being said, charges of "genocide" would not be received well in the U.S. It would make it harder to deal with the Armenian genocide resolutions in the Congress. The Ambassador also referred to the incident at Incirlik and some altercations in Ankara that demonstrated the dangers of the overheated atmosphere. The Ambassador expressed concern that an atmosphere was being created in which it was possible for people to say anything, no matter how scurrilous, about the U.S. These words could lead to actions that would cause injury or even death to Americans in Turkey. Gul agreed that "anti-Americanism is bad for you, bad for us, and bad for the cause of world peace." In that regard he tried to place in context his reported remark that "the U.S. has lost Turkey" due to inaction on the PKK. At the end, Gul agreed that the Turkish government should try to bound the outbreak of anti-Americanism.

114. (U) On the public diplomacy front, the Ambassador spent two hours November 26 in an on-the-record interview with the Ankara bureau chief of the Turkish daily "Aksam," briefing her on the reasons for the Fallujah operation, the tactics being used by the terrorists there, and what coalition forces found when they entered the city. The Ambassador supplemented the briefing with photos released by the U.S. military that show weapons caches in Fallujah mosques; slaughterhouses where hostages were held, tortured, and killed; weapons labs; car bomb factories; insurgent weapons stocks and equipment. The session resulted in a full-page spread the following day, including photos of weapons caches in mosques and of Iraqi government personnel distributing humanitarian assistance. The Ambassador's comments on the subject were reported accurately. Other columnists have begun to comment on the danger of Turkey loosely throwing around charges of genocide. We intend to get the briefing materials on what the U.S. found in Fallujah distributed more broadly in the press this week.

115. (C) Comment: As a result of the pervasive biased and anti-U.S. media coverage, most Turks have a view of Iraq that could come from al-Jazeera. To most Turks, Fallujah means massive civilian casualties, systematic U.S. military violations of the laws of war, wanton desecration of mosques. The MFA's lateness in correcting the record, officials' statements in line with media distortions, and the failure of all but a few Turkish opinion makers (including the military) to speak out on a factual basis have helped reinforce this perception and have created a poisonous anti-U.S. atmosphere on the subject of Iraq. We are told that the few columnists who have tried to portray a balanced view have received a backlash of criticism from officials, peers and readers. We are trying to correct the record, and more factual material faster would help, but the key will be getting Turkish officialdom and opinion leaders to stand up. We need Washington and Washington-based visitors to Turkey to send a consistent message that continued America-bashing will erode support for the GOT in Washington and create more problems for both sides down the road. End Comment.
EDELMAN